

Title: Interview with Renee Mears

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Location: Chesapeake Bay BBQ in Crisfield

Interviewer(s): Christian Ottey and Carolyn Kio

Interviewee: Renee Mears

Introduction: Renee Mears talks about growing up in Crisfield and opening up a restaurant in a more flood-prone area. She also talks about what it's like raising children and what she sees and hears as someone in the business industry. She discusses how she is hopeful for the revival of Crisfield with the younger generation.

[Transcription begins]

Christian Ottey (Ottey): Yep, it's recording. So, today's April 16th, 2025. We're here with...

Renee Mears (Mears): Renee Mears.

Ottey: And my name is Christian Ottey.

Carolyn Kio (Kio): And I'm Carolyn Kio.

Ottey: Let's get this interview started. I'm just going to start off just from reading from this list here. If we have any follow-up questions, we're probably just going to ask you from the information that you give us so. The first question we'll to ask here is, how long have you lived in the Crisfield area, and if you were born here, what was that like? And if you've retired here, or if you're planning on retiring here, why in Crisfield? And how has it changed since? What kind of keeps you in Crisfield? That's it.

Mears: Born- born and raised here. I'll- we'll soon be 53, so we did move away for just a few months and came back so but we've pretty much been here our whole life or at least in the general area. What was the question after that? I'm sorry.

Ottey: There was a lot of questions.

Mears: Yeah, that was a lot.

Ottey: Were you born here?

Mears: Yes.

Ottey: What was that like?

Mears: Childhood was great. It's- it was a good place. I was basically born in the 70s but kind of grew up around the 80s so. It was good, it was a great place to live.

Kio: And how has Crisfield changed in the time that you've been here?

Mears: A lot. So, when I was young, we had lots of stores, the economy was really good, the fishing industry, crabbing, crabs. You didn't have to worry about any kind of part-time jobs or. It's just really different, now it's very, a lot slower than what it used to be.

Kio: And what kind of keeps you in this area?

Mears: I would say family, but also, it's my home. When you're, I don't know, it's something about this. It just draws you; even when we moved away to Pennsylvania for six months, it drew me right back. It's just something, it is hard to explain. It's just- it just draws you back. This is like your home. You're just- it doesn't matter what changes it goes through. It's still your home, and you- and you want to be here. [pauses]

Ottey: So maybe how has your- how has your business kind of changed throughout the years in Crisfield?

Mears: It is much slower; I think I can speak for a lot of the businesses around here a lot. We, I mean, we still pick up in the summer with what tours we have, but I can just vividly remember working in this industry as a teenager and it being popping every day, like tons of people waiting to get into restaurants and things and it's not like that now. I mean, we're busy, but not, I would say a third of what this town used to be in the 80s.

Ottey: So, I'm guessing that is it's like peak time.

Mears: Winter time it's nothing, to the point you almost want to close the doors in the winter. And we're- we've actually thought about it for this year. We tried to stay open last year for the community just to give them a place to eat, but for the winter months it's nothing, it's bad.

Kio: What are some of your most cherished memories of Crisfield?

Mears: High school is great. We have a lot to do, a lot of friends, a lot of things to do around here. Crab Derbies were always our favorite. We look forward to that every year. Going out, hanging out. Probably summer, just summers and all the things that we could do around here. It's probably my best memories. Community-wise, outside of just family memories, but community-wise, this is probably all the events and things that we used to have around here.

Ottey: So, what kind of events did they have? You mentioned the Crab Derby was one of them.

Mears: We had Crab Derby, we had Clam Bake, they had just things that come, a circus would come, like things, the carnival would come out even outside of Crab Derby, you know, they- they did it up for fireworks. It's just a lot of- every holiday there was something we could do.

Ottey: And there are most of those events still around, there are some of them left?

Mears: Some of them left- have left, we don't see like the circus or the carnivals or- or anything like that now. I mean, they still have Crab Derby, it's gotten better last year, but that even kind of fizzled a little, especially since COVID.

Kio: How do you entertain yourself in Crisfield? Do you attend any community events regularly?

Mears: I personally don't. If there's something happening at the Elks or the American Legion, sometimes we'll go, but- or if there's an event we'll try to- to go. But at my age it's just kind of more of a slow pace, but there's not a whole lot to do. If we entertain, we- if it's something majorly we just go out we're really bored, just go out of town.

Ottey: So, you'd probably say there's more to do outside of Crisfield nowadays than there is to do actually inside of Crisfield?

Mears: Yes- yes, for sure.

Ottey: So, has there been any like recreational activities maybe outdoors nature-y things that you've come to like about Crisfield or has maybe changed in Crisfield?

Mears: I don't personally do a lot of the nature stuff, but I know that we really push it for our tourists. We have the- the park that's really gotten more than probably, I mean, it might have always been there, but I just didn't know as a kid. I mean, we would go to the park. If we went to the park, it was for a family. They used to have, you know, a children's area. You would have a lot of picnics at Janes Island, but I don't think they even have a kids' area anymore. But from what I understand, they do have a lot of nature stuff and we do send tourists there. More so than probably when I was younger. We used the park for something totally different. It was just a picnic area for us.

Kio: So, what role does the waterfront or the Chesapeake Bay in general play in recreation and social life for this community?

Mears: What was that again?

Kio: What role does waterfront, or the Chesapeake Bay in general, play in the recreation for the social life in this community?

Mears: Oh yeah, if we didn't have that, I really don't know what we would do. I mean, yeah, that's right now, that's all we have. With canoeing and kayaking and- and just people coming down to look at the water. We- we get customers here that literally just drive down to go to the end of the dock, look at water, look at boats, or they'll go to, you know, to the beach area, just kind of. If we didn't have that, I don't even think we would get what we do have. If we didn't have the little- and the marina too. I should- should include them. We do get a lot of people from the marina. Their boats.

Kio: So, have you noticed any changes in the land, weather, water or flooding in Crisfield in your time here?

Mears: It's a lot more flooding than it used to be. I only remember one time being out of school for flooding. I don't ever remember days upon days that they have to take out now. We don't have snow days, we have flood days, and that's the truth. They're out for flooding in instead of snow. Flooding has always been here, don't want to say that, just seems. Even my yard is more flooded and I live down the neck. I don't know if you've heard that, but we live on the outskirts of Crisfield. Even our yard that's never really flooded like anything is now flooding.

Kio: So how has flooding impacted your personal daily life?

Mears: Here- here sometimes if it's flooded, the roads are flooded up. It does prevent us from having customers if you're seeing in a business aspect of it. They won't drive their cars through it. We get- we get a lot of flooding here. We've had it in the building one time. It does prevent us; I do believe it stops a lot of businesses from even getting customers.

Ottey: So, have you like maybe done anything to try and prepare for flooding through this business or maybe your house too?

Mears: Yeah, here, when they, when we get warned, I mean, that's the thing too, sometimes we just don't know. Now, we were pretty- pretty prepared last October, they- they said some flooding was coming. So, we did try to put up things as high as we could. This building is, when it was remodeled, all the plugs are higher. The baseboards are plastic. These are concrete to prevent if the floods do come in, it won't- it won't mold. But so that when this building was remodeled, it was remodel towards flooding. And the floor is epoxy. We have no- we have no regular flooring in the building, it's either concrete or epoxy.

Ottey: So, would you say any other businesses around Crisfield also do the same thing when they remodel or?

Mears: I think a lot of them haven't remodeled lately. I know that I've been in talks with a man, a gentleman that's about to remodel a building down the street and he's scared to do the same thing. He's scared, actually he's going to block it and then put walls. But he's- he's gonna do the same thing in his remodel because it got flooded in that building as well. So, I know of that one. I don't know of much of any others.

Kio: Do you see other citizens in the city preparing for such events in any way?

Mears: Yes, same thing all business owners. We try to put things up as high as they can. We don't get flooding in our house. So, we don't really, we just make sure things aren't able to float around the yard. But yeah, we see people when they say the flooding is coming, when we get warned, I wanna reiterate that we just don't know. But if we they do think it's going to, I do see a lot of people putting things up, securing. And they actually send laptops home at school when they know that the flooding's coming. So, my grandchildren, they prepare them so when they're out of school they can just do work from home.

Kio: Are there any storms or flooding events that you remember like the most vividly?

Mears: Well, everybody remembers Hurricane Sandy, and then there was a time I remember in middle school, so that would have been, you know, the early 80s, late 70s, early 80's that I remember the National Guard bringing my mother home from work. I just remember that, and us playing in the- and we lived near the Woodson School, so that area that floods anyway, we lived in the apartments. And I just remember that vividly being a lot of water.

Ottey: Do you think you could tell us a bit more about Hurricane Sandy?

Mears: We lived right on the outskirts of town, so we didn't get, and we didn't have a business at the time. So, we were fortunate, but I just remember so many people lost, all the videos that were coming through, and the- and the devastation. My parents were flooded in, they lost- they lost a lot in their house, had to do a lot of repairs. But yeah, that was- that was- that was a scary time for our town, I feel. Like, we just didn't know when that was coming through what was going to be left, and I think we're still feeling the. Somebody this- this particular building was one of the buildings that was hit and it has sat, it was remodeled. We started the remodel process April of 2023, and we- we got it, it took 14 months. So, we didn't open this until this past July 2024. But this was one of the buildings hit, and it had to be gutted. But it was just one of many buildings that sit around town after Hurricane Sandy. It really devastated our town.

Ottey: So, are there are there maybe like some areas of Crisfield that aren't doing remodeling as much or maybe getting left behind in the infrastructure changes to prevent flooding?

Mears: I don't know. I mean, our downtown looks terrible, but they said they just sold it to Tidal Health, so I don't know, that one was really, that used to be the hub, it was backwards, we didn't

really go down this end of town much the, you know, the depot as much as a child is downtown. This was downtown to us, stores and all, and then I think after Hurricane Sandy, those buildings have just been sitting dormant. I don't know, I'm not really knowing of any like empty lanes that they're not building up because of the flooding. I'm not sure. I know that a lot of the houses around us now are required to be like 100 feet off the ground, I think it's like six or seven blocks high. Even in my neighborhood, which is on the outskirts of town that doesn't even flood as much, we don't get that much flooding. And they're making them build their houses up, that a-that's different.

Ottey: So how much is it costing people to- to do these renovations? Does the city provide any help for that?

Mears: The city does not. I don't know. My landlord has, did spend a lot of money. I know the floor loan, I think he said, because we didn't get it in the whole building, was 20 grand just for the floor. So, I imagine, I mean, if you price the- the concrete board versus a regular drywall, it's probably triple the cost. And I know there's no- there's no grants or no help for renovations like this. I think they had a facade grant one time just to kind of fix the outsides, but not the insides. The heart of the building is no help.

Kio: Have you participated in any community events surrounding the issues of flooding or do these events like even exist?

Mears: I don't know any of the events that exist.

Kio: And what's your opinion on this increase in these severe weather activities?

Mears: I don't know. I really don't, I don't know, I wish I knew, but, I mean, the old people said it was going to eventually catch up with us when you build land on oyster shells. But that's just old people. I don't know, I don't know, it's climate, I don't know, I know that we're a lot warmer than we used to be. Growing up it was a lot more snow, a lot more cooler weather.

Kio: Do you think climate change is something people in Crisfield actively discuss?

Mears: Oh, winter time they do. You go down to Gordon's any day of the week when it's winter time and if we get the least bit of snow, they're going to tell you their snow stories. I have them. I mean, we used to build furniture out of snow and snowmen and forts and you're not getting that kind of snow now. I mean we definitely had snow days, not flood days growing up. So, it's definitely warmer. This past winter was probably the most snow we've seen in a long time and I know there was chitter chatter about that.

Ottey: So, you'd say a lot of people in the community have just kind of noticed the decrease in like snow and stuff like that because now it's more flooding instead?

Mears: Yes, yes. [pauses]

Ottey: I'm going to transition here to get more information about what the youth have to do here nowadays, because we've heard there's not really too much going on for the youth.

Mears: Not at all. If you don't play sports, I think you're kind of left behind. It's- it's- it's a heavy sports town, but outside of sports there's really nothing for the children. [pauses]

Ottey: So, what do you- what do you think is kind of missing for the youth to do- to go out and do? I know you talked a lot about your youth and how you were just going out during the summers and stuff.

Mears: We- we had a lot of place, I mean, we didn't, in my mother's time they had bowling alleys and things like that, I didn't. But we, I think we had a lot more, even if it was hanging out, that sounds terrible, but hanging out in a parking lot. We, no one said anything, no one ran us off. I think the police are more, like, [chewing?]. We would have gatherings and people's home's more than, you know, a family might put a big bonfire out back for us. I don't think that sense is there anymore either. I don't know if it's the fast pace of people's lives. But we- there was always something that we could get into. Not necessarily, there was churches that had a party, you know, there was, it sounds terrible, but they really did have DJs and things at- at churches. And we- we would have dances. The VFW, which is now closed, had a teen dance every month. It was just. We might not have been movies, but we just had stuff to do, and no one- and no one ran us off like they do to children now.

Kio: Do you think younger generations are less likely to stay in Crisfield now?

Mears: I think, yeah, I think they'll leave. The ones that- that can. There's some, unfortunately, that are going to be stopped. But I think the ones that can will leave. I don't think the town is fast-paced enough for this generation. There's no nightlife.

Kio: So, tell us about raising children in Crisfield. How did that go?

Mears: It was great. My children are older, but there was a lot of involvement, parent involvement, more so than I see now with my grandkids. You didn't fear, like if you couldn't make it to an event that somebody else wouldn't, you know, watch over your child. Just a lot more involvement, I think, parental involvement, back when we were parenting children. It could have been still a little difficult in some areas because of the entertainment, but we just traveled outside, outside of Crisfield to be involved in some things outside of there but.

Ottey: Could you tell us a bit more about how your children kind of like grew up here and where they are now?

Mears: They're still around, they still live here. It's and like what and what was that again, repeat that so I can answer it correctly.

Ottey: I was just kind of wondering where your kids are right now. Like what they do for work?

Mears: So, my daughter works, the one daughter works in the school system. She is a paraprofessional in the school with disabled children. My son works at the county jail as a correctional officer. My other daughter does a Facebook Live business where she sells, she's a little entrepreneur. And my other daughter works as an office- in the office of one of the big seafood, Southern Connection Seafood industry, in the seafood industry.

Kio: It's really awesome that they all seem to have local jobs. Have you noticed a trend in younger generations leaving Crisfield to find jobs?

Mears: Here's the funny thing in this business, and I can speak as business owners who get a little different, but the applications that are coming in, honestly, are from young people, not adults. But it's just not enough business. I wish I could hire them all. So I feel like people that don't know are misjudging these young generations saying they're lazy, don't want to work, but they're the ones that really do want to work. They really do wanna work. That there's nothing, there's not even summer jobs to keep them entertained around here anymore. When I was young you could go to any restaurant, we had five, six restaurants, we had lots. You could go and pick crabs or wrap crabs, but there's nothing for the [inaudible]. They want to work. I think, did I just answer that wrong?

Kio: No, that's perfect. That's perfect! [pauses]

Mears: I think that if there was more here then the younger generation would stay.

Ottey: So you'd say it's more like the industry kind of dying out a bit, and not having any new jobs to kind of move. [pauses] So I'm wondering if there's any city projects or local projects that kind of make you feel hopeful for the future of Crisfield. So, what's kind of going on maybe city-wise over there?

Mears: I know that they have just sold, I believe, the- the old abandoned buildings downtown for TidalHealth to bring in some specialists. So that's hopeful that maybe it'll draw in. Hopefully, it's just not maintained just by locals and it's actually people will travel to Crisfield for a specialist or something. That might bring in a little bit of business. Bringing people to move here, that they can be a little more self-contained. I don't really know of anything else, to be fair. I, I mean, they had a 2.0 grant, but that's, one was a daycare, one's was a psychiatrist. I mean, I- they are nice things, but there is another restaurant. That was- that was nice, but I don't think they're bringing in the right kind of business is for the screens. Nothing against those. But it

needs to be things that will draw people here, and I don't- I don't see that project being helpful for, you know, for the industry, for the for the tourists or the people to draw here.

Kio: Can you tell me a little bit how you think the future of local business is looking? How are you feeling about that? I know that's a pretty heavy question.

Mears: I'm hopeful. I think there's newer people coming in to power, so to speak, that really want a lot for the town. I think if they can continue to keep that energy and- and really, I think, if they talked more with the local businesses of what we see, because we talk to the- the tourists and the locals more probably than the council does. But I feel like if they could keep an energy up and not just talk about things, really put in place in to maybe even help sustain the ones that are here to get through winters, I think it would be better. But I don't know. I think sometimes when I listen to the council meetings, it sounds like they've got good energy, and then other times I think it's things like the 2.0 grant. Like, it's just my opinion.

Ottey: So, do you think that there's more of like a disconnect between the- the council members and the local community or are they pretty connected?

Mears: They do try to support, like, I don't want it down them, I mean, there's- there's some that they've come here and they've ate at the restaurant, you know, they'll ask, you know, very generic questions, "Hey, how has it been?" You know, things like that. But to really, and they have town hall meetings now, they've just started with the community, but I feel like it needs to be more, I- I think there is a little disconnect. I think if they even have a small round table meeting with a global business and say, "What is it that you need?" I think that would be like an awesome thing. I think they look too much at the broad picture and not let's secure what we have here already.

Ottey: So maybe like they should maybe be a bit more inclusive and try and get more voices from like industry?

Mears: Yeah. [pauses]

Ottey: So, we're almost at 30 minutes here, so we've got a bit more time for some more questions.

Kio: Let's try and get a little bit more hopeful with it.

Mears: Sorry.

Kio: No, it's a tough thing to talk about.

Ottey: And you're all over the place so.

Kio: So, are you hopeful for the future of Crisfield? It seems like they- you said there was a little bit of a dip during COVID, and now we're on a bit of the rebound?

Mears: Yeah, I think there's been more, like we- we had a business here and we moved it to Princess Anne. It was nothing to do with business because we had our great business here. And we moved it to Princess Anne. It was just a short-term lease. So, I mean, we took a leap of faith- faith in being hopeful when we opened up this because I feel like if people, not to pat myself on the back, but people like me don't take that. Put that little bit of hope, that little bit of mustard seed and just open up something hopeful. That we get enough businesses in town that it'll spark like it used to be once upon a time. So, I think there's been a couple of little new places popping up here and there, so I'm hopeful that if that just kind of catches and we can get some support to keep us through those hard months. Our landlord here has been great, I think he sees the vision. He keeps our rent low, the cost low, to keep us open. He's very open to help whatever we need. And he's been buying a lot of the little businesses around. So if we can get more people like him to see that and to make it affordable for people like me to- to spark the town, I think, I think it- I think we can turn this around. We can turn this around, and utilize the marina a little bit better, and just making people aware of what we have. And even across the street here to the crab place, it's a great name. Thousands of people run through that door, just figure out how we can just make it all.

Ottey: So, do you think other community members or other residents in Crisfield feel the same way? Do they also feel kind of hopeful for the future of Crisfield?

Mears: I think so. You're going to always have your negative amongst that. It doesn't matter what you do. It's just a small town. But I think people with a little bit more vision is going to be hopeful.

Kio: What are your thoughts on relocation? Have you known family, friends, neighbors to relocate or do you consider it yourself sometimes?

Mears: I've had family members that live in the Ocean City area that always say to me, "Move your restaurant, start one up here, you're gonna make the money." And I just, I'm very, I'm hopeful, like she's saying, I just- I just stick it out here, cause I just think it's gonna take, it's going to take. I gotta be, I can't, I gotta be a part of the solution, and- and- and let's just jump with both feet. Take a chance. So, I think it's more, I think there's ones out there that are scared, but if they had some kind of support, like- like say it's going to be okay, we're going to help you get this going, I would think it would be better.

Ottey: So, if other business owners kind of maybe move to places like Ocean City or Salisbury, they can move their business there to get more customers and more money?

Mears: I don't know if they've actually relocated or just unfortunately closed. I don't know. I know- I know of one girl that was- that had a slushy place. I think she's moved hers. I don't know exactly but that was talks that she was she was moving hers. I'm- I'm not sure if she if she ever did. [pauses]

Ottey: So, I guess overall, would you recommend Crisfield as a place to live?

Mears: Yeah, cause at the end of the day, the people here, really, my husband had a bone marrow transplant. And if it wasn't for my community, they put fundraisers on, they- they did a GoFundMe, and if it wasn't, we had to live in Baltimore for four months in an apartment that's triple what we pay here. And if we didn't have our community to help pay for that, I don't know what we would have done. He was very sick, and it helped with my travel, it helped pay for the apartment. At the end of the day, it really, the people, community really, they might bitch and complain, but they're- they're going be there, gonna give you the support that you need when things like that happen. And I can speak that over and over with a lot of different situations with people that come together. So, I would definitely, if anything, the community. That sense of. [pauses]

Ottey: So, would you have any maybe words of wisdom or recommendations for future generations that want to come into Crisfield? Or maybe young generations that might want to move away from Crisfield, but maybe you see them want to stay?

Mears: Yeah, you know, really consider it when you do move away, because it's a big old world. You're not going to have Aunt Susie or, you know, little Johnny's mom, who's watched you be raised your whole life to be there to help, because they would. You know, you're going out and all. I'm- I'm not saying other communities wouldn't bring them in, but just sometimes big's not always better. I think they made me really consider on that aspect, and staying here, I just think if- if that fear or that sense they felt like they're supported, they can start something here. They could be the next ones to really take this. The young generation can make a change here. They just have to get that fear away and feel like they are supported by us big people. I think if they just have the support and the encouragement, I think they could do something. Because they know what people want, I mean, right now it's just an old people town, but it could- it could bring life into it if we really support our young people.

Kio: And acknowledging that we ourselves are young people, do you have any advice on what can be done by the younger generation or how they could be best supported in this scenario to help redevelop this area?

Mears: We just have to listen to you guys. Like listen, like. The- the way it's always been is not working now, like there's- don't be stuck in not, change is good, it's not bad. Change isn't bad. As- as long as us, the older generation, realizes that change isn't not bad, a new set of eyes, the world has changed. And there might even be something a young person can tell me in my

business that draws in that, I mean. The old people could die, so the young people need to be the ones to carry the town, but I think if- if- if we, as an older generation, could just sit back and listen. But in the same aspect, I think we can learn from each other. Experience, sometimes it's took us a long time to get where we want, and I do think sometimes a new generation wants an instant. They live there. That's how everything's instant. But if they took their knowledge of what works for anything, from food to entertainment and just know that it doesn't happen overnight, take the advice from the old people that it takes time, but to really listen. I think that would be a, gosh, that would such a great, that will be a dynamic duo right there. If you just get there.

Kio: So, in the grand scheme of things, I know we've talked about Crisfield needing more community-centered events like they had in the past as well as more focus on flood prevention. Do you think one kind of leads to the other and with a tighter-knit community, you'd have more community to rally together for floods or with flood prevention, you have more people willing to stay?

Mears: I think, unfortunately, it's going to be you got to figure out this flooding. I- I do because you're gonna, I just think it has to be addressed. Cause can't even, like I said, open the door some days, so it's, I get why people think it's pointless to put things here if you can't open it yet, but I do think they need to get a handle on how you fix that. They do need to get a handle. Then I think once people see that, they're really, really trying to fix it. Then all the others will fall in place. It's not for nothing.

Ottey: So, flooding is kind of maybe starting some people from investing into a future in Crisfield?

Mears: Yeah, I think so. And we see, we even see, you know, some of the people that are coming here to retire are hesitant. And that's the first thing to say, "Does there flood though? Such and such. I'm looking at these houses." We see it all the time. "Do you know if it floods down there? Yeah, how bad does it flood? Where's an area that don't flood?" So even getting drawing, I know it's more retire people, but even getting them here, it's a- it's very much hesitation because of the floods. [pauses]

Ottey: Well, I don't have other questions, so I think we can go ahead and wrap it up here.

Kio: We really appreciate your insight and it's been really refreshing to get a hopeful take on this and I feel like you had a ton of great like advice for the future of Crisfield. That's where we're going to go.

[Transcript ends]